

Uncle Ernest

Alan Sillitoe

Alan Sillitoe was born in 1928 in Nottingham.

He writes novels and short stories, mostly about working-class people in the Midlands.

His best-known books are: Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1958), The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner (1959).



A middle-aged man wearing a dirty raincoat, who badly needed a shave and looked as though he hadn't washed for a month, came out of a public lavatory with a cloth bag of tools folded beneath his arm. Standing for a moment on the edge of the pavement to adjust his cap - the cleanest thing about him - he looked casually to left and right and, when the flow of traffic had eased off, crossed the road. His name and trade were always spoken in one breath, even when the nature of his trade was not in question: Ernest Brown the upholsterer. Every night before returning to his lodgings he left the bag of tools for safety with a man who looked after the public lavatory near the town centre, for he felt there was a risk of them being lost or stolen should he take them back to his room, and if such a thing were to happen his living would be gone. Chimes to the value of half past ten boomed from the Council-house clock. Over the theatre patches of blue sky held hard-won positions against autumnal clouds, and a treacherous wind lashed out its gusts, sending paper and cigarette packets cartwheeling along unswept gutters. Empty-bellied Ernest was ready for his breakfast, so walked through a cafe doorway, instinctively lowering his head as he did so, though the beams were a foot above his height.

The long spacious eating-place was almost full. Ernest usually arrived for his breakfast at nine o'clock, but having been paid ten pounds for re-covering a three-piece in a public house the day before, he had stationed himself in the Saloon Bar for the rest of the evening to drink jar after jar of beer, in a slow prolonged and concentrated way that lonely men have. As a result it had been

difficult to drag himself from drugged and blissful sleep this morning. His face was pale and his eyes an unhealthy yellow: when he spoke only a few solitary teeth showed behind his lips.

Having passed through the half dozen noisy people standing about he found himself at the counter, a scarred and chipped haven for hands, like a

littered invasion beach extending between two headlands of tea urns. The big fleshy brunette was busy, so he hastily scanned the list written out in large white letters on the wall behind. He made a timid gesture with his hand. "A cup of tea, please."

5 The brunette turned on him. Tea swilled from a huge brown spout-into a cup that had a crack emerging like a hair above the layer of milk - and a spoon clinked after it into the steam. "Anything else?"

He spoke up hesitantly. "Tomatoes on toast as well." Picking up the plate pushed over to him he moved slowly backwards out of the crowd, then turned

10 and walked towards a vacant corner table.

A steamy appetizing smell rose from the plate: he took up the knife and fork and, with the sharp clean action of a craftsman, cut off a corner of the toast and tomato and raised it slowly to his mouth, eating with relish and hardly noticing people sitting round-about. Each wielding of his knife and

15 fork, each geometrical cut of the slice of toast, each curve and twist of his lips joined in a complex and regular motion that gave him great satisfaction. He ate slowly, quietly and contentedly, aware only of himself and his body being warmed and made tolerable once more by food. The leisurely movement of spoon and cup and saucer made up the familiar noise of late breakfast in a

20 crowded cafe, sounded like music flowing here and there in variations of rhythm.

For years he had eaten alone, but was not yet accustomed to loneliness. He could not get used to it, had only adapted himself to it temporarily in the hope that one day its spell would break. Ernest remembered little of his past, and

25 life moved under him so that he hardly noticed its progress. There was no strong memory to entice him to what had gone by, except that of dead and dying men,

straggling barbed-wire between the trenches in the first world war Two sentences had dominated his lips during the years that followed: "I should not be here in England.

I should be dead with the rest of them in

30 France." Time bereft him of these sentences, till only a dull wordless image remained.

He lifted the last piece of toast and tomato from his plate, then felt dregs of tea moving against his teeth. When he had finished chewing he lit a cigarette and was once more aware of people sitting around him. It was eleven o'clock

35 and the low-roofed cafe was slowly emptying, leaving only a dozen people inside.

He knew that at one table they were talking about horse-racing and at another about war, but words only flowed into his ears and entered his mind at a low pitch of comprehension, leaving it calm and content as he vaguely contemplated the positions and patterns of tables about the room.

40 There would be no work until two o'clock, so he intended sitting where he

was until then. Yet a sudden embarrassment at having no food on the table to justify a prolonged occupation of it sent him to the counter for tea and cakes.

As he was being served two small girls came in. One sat at a table but the
5 second and elder stood at the counter. When he returned to his place he found the younger girl sitting there. He was confused and shy, but nevertheless sat down to drink tea and cut a cake into four pieces. The girl looked at him and continued to do so until the elder one came from the counter carrying two cups of steaming tea.

10 They sat talking and drinking, utterly oblivious of Ernest, who slowly felt their secretive, childish animation enter into himself. He glanced at them from time to time, feeling as if he should not be there, though when he looked at them he did so in a gentle way, with kind, full-smiling eyes. The elder girl, about twelve years old, was dressed in a brown coat that was too big for her,

15 and though she was talking and laughing most of the time he noticed the paleness of her face and her large round eyes that he would have thought beautiful had he not detected the familiar type of vivacity that expressed neglect and want.

The smaller girl was less lively and merely smiled as she answered her sister
20 with brief curt words. She drank her tea and warmed her hands at the same time without putting the cup down once until she had emptied it. Her thin red fingers curled around the cup as she stared into the leaves, and gradually the talk between them died down and they were silent, leaving the field free for traffic that could be heard moving along the street outside, and for inside
25 noises made by the brunette who washed cups and dishes ready for the rush that was expected at midday dinner-time.

Ernest was calculating how many yards of rexine would be needed to cover the job he was to do that afternoon, but when the younger girl began speaking he listened to her, hardly aware that he was doing so.

30 "If you've got any money I'd like a cake, our Alma."

"I haven't got any more money," the elder one replied impatiently.

"Yes you have, and I'd like a cake."

She was adamant, almost aggressive. "Then you'll have to want on, because I've only got tuppence."

35 "You can buy a cake with that," the young girl persisted, twining her fingers around the empty cup. "We don't need bus fares home because it ain't far to walk."

"We can't walk home: it might rain."

"No it won't."

40 "Well I want a cake as well, but I'm not walking all that way," the elder

girl said conclusively, blocking any last gap that might remain in her defences. The younger girl gave up and said nothing, looked emptily in front of her. Ernest had finished eating and took out a cigarette, struck a match across the iron fastening of a table leg and, having inhaled deeply, allowed smoke
5 to wander from his mouth. Like a gentle tide washing in under the moon, a line of water flowing inwards and covering the sand, a feeling of acute loneliness took hold of him, an agony that would not let him weep. The two girls sat before him wholly engrossed in themselves, still debating whether they should buy a cake, or whether they should ride home on a bus.

10 "But it'll be cold," reasoned the elder, "walking home."
"No it won't," the other said, but with no conviction in her words. The sound of their voices told him how lonely he was, each word feeding him with so much more loneliness that he felt utterly unhappy and empty.

Time went slowly: the minute-hand of the clock seemed as if it were nailed
15 immovably at one angle. The two girls looked at each other and did not notice him: he withdrew into himself and felt the emptiness of the world and wondered how he would spend all the days that seemed to stretch vacantly, like goods on a broken-down conveyor belt, before him. He tried to remember things that had happened and felt panic when he discovered a thirty-year
20 vacuum. All he could see behind was a grey mist and all he could see before him was the same unpredictable fog that would hide nothing. He wanted to, walk out of the cafe and find some activity so that he would henceforth be able to mark off the passage of his empty days, but he had no will to move. He heard someone crying so shook himself free of such thoughts and saw the
25 younger girl with hands to her eyes, weeping. "What's the matter?" he asked tenderly, leaning across the table.

The elder girl replied for her, saying sternly:

"Nothing. She's acting daft."

"But she must be crying for some reason. What is it?" Ernest persisted,
30 quietly and soothingly, bending closer still towards her. "Tell me what's wrong." Then he remembered something. He drew it like a live thread from a mixture of reality and dream, hanging on to vague words that floated back into his mind. The girls' conversation came to him through an intricate process of recollection. "I'll get you something to eat," he ventured. "Can I?"

35 She unscrewed clenched fingers from her eyes and looked up, while the elder girl glared at him resentfully and said: "We don't want anything. We're going now."

"No, don't go," he cried. "You just sit down and see what I'm going to get for you." He stood up and walked to the counter, leaving them whispering
40 to each other.

He came back with a plate of pastries and two cups of tea, which he set before the girls, who looked on in silence. The younger was smiling now. Her round eager eyes were fascinated, yet followed each movement of his hands with some apprehension. Though still hostile the elder girl was gradually
5 subdued by the confidently working actions of his hands, by caressing words and the kindness that showed in his face. He was wholly absorbed in doing good and, at the same time, fighting the feeling of loneliness that he still remembered, but only as a nightmare is remembered.

The two children fell under his spell, began to eat cakes and sip the tea.

10 They glanced at each other, and then at Ernest as he sat before them smoking a cigarette. The cafe was still almost empty, and the few people eating were so absorbed in themselves, or were in so much of a hurry to eat their food and get out that they took little notice of the small company in the corner. Now that the atmosphere between himself and the two girls had grown
15 more friendly Ernest began to talk to them. "Do you go to school?" he asked.

The elder girl automatically assumed control and answered his questions.

"Yes, but today we had to come down town on an errand for our mam."

"Does your mother go out to work, then?"

20 "Yes," she informed him. "All day."

Ernest was encouraged. "And does she cook your dinners?"

She obliged him with another answer. "Not until night."

"What about your father?" he went on.

"He's dead," said the smaller girl, her mouth filled with food, daring to

25 speak outright for the first time. Her sister looked at her with disapproval, making it plain that she had said the wrong thing and that she should only speak under guidance.

"Are you going to school then this afternoon?" Ernest resumed.

"Yes," the spokesman said.

30 He smiled at her continued hard control. "And what's your name then?"

"Alma," she told him, "and hers is Joan". She indicated the smaller girl with a slight nod of the head.

"Are you often hungry?"

She stopped eating and glanced at him, uncertain how to answer. "No, not

35 much," she told him non-committally, busily eating a second pastry.

"But you were today?"

"Yes," she said, casting away diplomacy like the crumpled cake paper she let fall to the floor.

He said nothing for a few moments, sitting with knuckles pressed to his lips.

40 "Well, look"-he began suddenly talking again-"I come in here every day

for my dinner, just about half past twelve, and if ever you're feeling hungry, come down and see me."

They agreed to this, accepted sixpence for their bus fares home, thanked him very much, and said goodbye.



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5 During the following weeks they came to see him almost every day. Sometimes, when he had little money, he filled his empty stomach with a cup of tea while Alma and Joan satisfied themselves on five shillings'-worth of more solid food. But he was happy and gained immense satisfaction from seeing them bending hungrily over eggs, bacon and pastries, and he was so

10 smoothed at last into a fine feeling of having something to live for that he hardly remembered the lonely days when his only hope of being able to talk to someone was by going into a public house to get drunk. He was happy now because he had his "little girls" to look after, as he came to call them. He began spending all his money to buy them presents, so that he was often

15 in debt at his lodgings. He still did not buy any clothes, for whereas in the past his money had been swilled away on beer, now it was spent on presents

and food for the girls, and he went on wearing the same old dirty mackintosh and was still without a collar to his shirt; even his cap was no longer clean. Every day, straight out of school, Alma and Joan ran to catch a bus for the town centre and, a few minutes later, smiling and out of breath, walked
5 into the cafe where Ernest was waiting. As days and weeks passed, and as Alma noticed how much Ernest depended on them for company, how happy he was to see them, and how obviously miserable when they did not come for a day-which was rare now-she began to demand more and more presents, more food, more money, but only in a particularly naive and childish way,
10 so that Ernest, in his oblivious contentment, did not notice it. But certain customers of the cafe who came in every day could not help but see how the girls asked him to buy them this and that, and how he always gave in with a nature too good to be decently true, and without the least sign of realizing what was really happening. He would never dream to question
15 their demands, for to him, these two girls whom he looked upon almost as his own daughters were the only people he had to love.

Ernest, about to begin eating, noticed two smartly dressed men sitting at a table a few yards away. They had sat in the same place the previous day, and also the day before that, but he thought no more about it because Joan and
20 Alma came in and walked quickly across to his table.

"Hello, Uncle Ernest!" they said brightly. "What can we have for dinner?" Alma looked across at the chalk-written list on the wall to read what dishes were available.

His face changed from the blank preoccupation of eating, and a smile of
25 happiness infused his cheeks, eyes, and the curve of his lips. "Whatever you like," he answered.

"But what have they got?" Alma demanded crossly. "I can't read their scrawl."

"Go up to the counter and ask for a dinner," he advised with a laugh.

30 "Will you give me some money then?"¹ she asked, her hand out. Joan stood by without speaking, lacking Alma's confidence, her face timid, and nervous because she did not yet understand this regular transaction of money between Ernest and themselves, being afraid that one day they would stand there waiting for money and Ernest would quite naturally look surprised and say
35 there was nothing for them.

He had just finished repairing an antique three-piece and had been paid that morning, so Alma took five shillings and they went to the counter for a meal. While they were waiting to be served, the two well-dressed men who had been watching Ernest for the last few days stood up and walked over to him.

Only one of them spoke; the other held his silence and looked on. "Are these two girls your daughters, or any relation to you?" the first asked, nodding towards the counter.

Ernest looked up and smiled. "No," he explained in a mild voice, "they're

5 The man's eyes were hard, and he spoke clearly. "What kind of friends?"

"Just friends. Why? Who are you?" He shuddered, feeling a kind of half guilt growing inside him for a half imagined reason that he hoped wasn't true.

"Never mind who we are. I just want you to answer my question."

Ernest raised his voice slightly, yet did not dare to look into the man's

10 arrogant eyes. "Why?" he cried. "What's it got to do with you? Why are you asking questions like this?"

"We're from the police station," the man remarked dryly, "and we've had complaints that you're giving these little girls money and leading them the wrong way!"

15 Ernest wanted to laugh, but only from misery. Yet he did not want to laugh in case he should annoy the two detectives. He started to talk: "But. . . but. . ." - then found himself unable to go on. There was much that he wanted to say, yet he could enunciate nothing, and a bewildered animal stare moved slowly into his eyes.

20 "Look," the man said emphatically, "we don't want any of your 'buts'. We know all about you. We know who you are. We've known you for years in fact, and we're asking you to leave those girls alone and have nothing more to do with them. Men like you shouldn't be giving money to little girls. You should know what you're doing, and have more sense."

25 Ernest protested loudly at last. "I tell you they're friends of mine. I mean no harm. I look after them and give them presents just as I would daughters of my own. They're the only company I've got. In any case why shouldn't I look after them? Why should you take them away from me? Who do you think you are? Leave me alone ... leave me alone." His voice had risen to a

30 weak scream of defiance, and the other people in the crowded cafe were looking around and staring at him, wondering what was the cause of the disturbance.

The two detectives acted quickly and competently, yet without apparent haste. One stood on each side of him, lifted him up, and walked him by the

35 counter, out on to the street, squeezing his wrists tightly as they did so. As Ernest passed the counter he saw the girls holding their plates, looking in fear and wonder at him being walked out.

They took him to the end of the street, and stood there for a few seconds talking to him, still keeping hold of his wrists and pressing their fingers hard

40 into them.

"Now look here, we don't want any more trouble from *you*, but if ever we see you near those girls again you'll find yourself up before a magistrate." The tone of finality in his voice possessed a physical force that pushed Ernest to the brink of sanity.

5 He stood speechless. He wanted to say so many things, but the words would not come to his lips. They quivered helplessly with shame and hatred, and so were incapable of making words. "We're asking you in a peaceful manner," the detective went on, "to leave them alone. Understand?"

"Yes," Ernest was forced to answer.

10 "Right. Go on then. And we don't want to see you with those girls again."

He was only aware of the earth sliding away from under his feet, and a wave of panic crashing into his mind, and he felt the unbearable and familiar emptiness that flowed outwards from a tiny and unknowable point inside him.

Then he was filled with hatred for everything, then intense pity for all the

15 movement that was going on around him, and finally even more intense pity for himself. He wanted to cry but could not: he could only walk away from his shame.

Then he began to shed agony at each step. His bitterness eddied away and a feeling the depth of which he had never known before took its place. There

20 was now more purpose in the motion of his footsteps as he went along the pavement through midday crowds. And it seemed to him that he did not care about anything any more as he pushed through the swing doors and walked into the crowded and noisy bar of a public house, his stare fixed by a beautiful heavily baited trap of beer pots that would take him into the one and only best kind of oblivion.

(from: *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*)

Discussion points

1. Collect information about Ernest: his appearance, his previous life, his home, his work, his daily routine, his interests, his pleasures, his sorrows. What sort of a picture do you get?
2. What do you learn about the girls' home background? How do they react to Ernest's kindness-to begin with and later on. Do they take advantage of him? If so, how? How do the girls affect his life?
3. Why do the policemen speak to Ernest? How do you interpret the words "We've known about you for years". Do you agree with what the policemen do? How does Ernest react to their order? What will happen to him, do you think?
4. Imagine that you are going to make a film of *Uncle Ernest*. Which scenes would you include in the film, and why? Would you like to add any scenes not described in the book? What would the last scene in your film be?
5. Ernest turns to drink to drown his sorrows, "to take him into the one and only best kind of oblivion". Drunkenness is a common problem in many countries all over the world. Why do people drink too much? Why do teenagers and even young children get drunk? What do people mean when they say that drinking is not a disease, it is only the symptom of a disease? In what ways can alcoholics be helped? Is prohibition the best answer?